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Postmodern Criticism of National Propaganda for War

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IN *SLAUGHTERHOUSE FIVE, PARADISE,* AND *THE LEFT HAND OF DARKNESS,* AUTHORS KURT VONNEGUT, TONI MORRISON AND URSULA LE GUIN ATTEMPT TO DISMANTLE THE ROMANTICIZED WARTIME IMAGES THAT HAVE BEEN USED TO FUEL RATIONALIZATIONS FOR PARTICIPATING IN WAR. TROPES SUCH AS THE ALWAYS-HEROIC SOLDIER, THE END-GOAL OF PARADISE, AND THE RIGHTEOUSNESS OF NATIONALIST PRIDE ARE SHOWN TO BE MYTHS, AT BEST, AND OFTEN DANGEROUS DECEPTIONS. BY SHATTERING NATIONAL META-NARRATIVES WHICH IGNORE THE SAVAGERY AND TRAGEDY OF WAR, THESE POSTMODERN NOVELS REVEAL THE LESS GLORIOUS TRUTHS BEHIND THE IDEALIZED FANTASY OF FIGHTING, ULTIMATELY QUESTIONING THE VALIDITY OF WAR IN GENERAL.

WRITTEN at the time of the conflict with Vietnam, Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse Five* revises classic linear narrative and connects all wars by reflecting back on World War II. The novel offers a portrait of the war soldier by presenting a cast of young men who take up arms outside of Dresden, Germany. Though these soldiers are inexperienced and inadequate figures acting as heroes, they imagine themselves to be risking their lives for the love of their country. They appeal to the myths of the John Wayne hero in an effort to imitate a fantasy of wartime heroism and effectively raise war out of its savagery by idealizing it. Vonnegut's representation of this problem with the way war is justified through meta-narrative can be connected to other postmodern texts, including Toni Morrison's *Paradise* and Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness.* Like the idealized hero in *Slaughterhouse Five,* these novels present romanticized figures which fuel our rationalizations for participating in war. Why do postmodern novels like these address the phenomenon of war? Do they simply wish to nod to those historical conflicts whose consequences helped shape the literature of postmodernism as a whole?

All three aforementioned novels focus on the national ideology of war in an attempt to shatter those meta-narratives which ignore the inconsistencies between the romanticized concept of war and the true nature of fighting. Rather than uphold the accepted ideologies, these postmodern novels challenge them by revealing the less glorious truths behind the idealized fantasy of war. *Slaughterhouse Five* challenges the romanticized image of war heroism central to its characters' motivations for participating in war by offering alternative, disturbing visions of the soldier. Billy Pilgrim, the protagonist of Vonnegut's work, represents a ridiculous soldier unfit to stand at the front; stripped of his masculinity and apathetic to his cause, Billy mocks the war effort as a whole. While Vonnegut shatters the idealization of war heroism through exposing the image of the inglorious soldier, Morrison critiques war meta-narratives by addressing the desire for paradise, what we fight our wars to finally achieve. Through rooting *Paradise* in the historical wounding of African Americans, she presents the desire to establish an isolated, exclusive utopia as a form of militaristic black nationalism. In their effort to maintain racial purity within Ruby, those families which hold community power police their paradise and suppress those

Image left - *The Glass Tree* by Margaret Griffiths

members who openly display desire and difference. By presenting Ruby as an unsustainable illusion of utopia, Morrison sets out to challenge the idealized image of paradise and critique the underlying attitude of black nationalism. Ursula Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* also engages with the classical treatment of war by shattering the national ideology that idealizes loyalty to one's country. Through the example of King Argaven in Karhide, she shows a form of patriotism rooted in fear and rejection of difference. She challenges the romanticized notion of patriotism by exposing the potential for man to lose sight of what it means to truly love his country. While these three novelists choose different ways of exploring meta-narratives which idealize the concepts most necessary to justify fighting, their critiques all ultimately serve to question the validity of war in general.

VONNEGUT'S CRITIQUE OF HEROISM

The romanticized militaristic hero, who characterizes meta-narratives on World War II, is marked by his qualities of bravery and strength during wartime. Supported by myths of the John Wayne hero, the idealized soldier risks his life for the love of his country and gallantly fights with a maintained sense of the inhuman, terrible nature of war. In his novel *Slaughterhouse Five*, Kurt Vonnegut sets out to revise this meta-narrative about war by providing an unconventional depiction of World War II. He represents two disturbing visions of the soldier in an attempt to challenge the idealized image of war heroism: the ridiculous soldier unfit to stand at the front and the robotic soldier who has no connection to the violence of war. Vonnegut's inglorious portrayal of those fighting in World War II shatters the notion of masculinity that surrounds the war effort; left without the valor or the humanity of its soldiers, war loses its romantic, quixotic quality. With such disturbing images of the absurd and robotic soldiers, Vonnegut asserts that there are no true glorified heroes in war—a claim which serves to question our participation in war in general.

In place of the clean-shaven, crisp-uniformed American soldier who embodies these heroic qualities, Vonnegut offers Billy Pilgrim, a scrawny, peculiar young man with no desire to fight in the war. Billy is constantly rebuked by the other soldiers for his absurd attire and his lack of concern for the war. In reality, however, Billy is not much worse than these other prisoners of war who are physically weak or too old to fight. Vonnegut describes the impression given by Billy and his comrades upon encountering their enemy. He writes, "The eight ridiculous Dresdeners ascertained that these hundred ridiculous creatures really *were* American fighting men fresh from the front. They smiled, and then they laughed. Their terror evaporated. There was nothing to be afraid of. Here were more crippled human beings, more fools like themselves. Here was light opera."[1] Even to the ill-prepared, unqualified enemy, the idea that Billy and his fellow soldiers represent any sort of great American threat is laughable. It is as though all the true soldiers have already been killed in the war, and these crippled fools are the only Americans left to stand and pretend to fight. To conceive that these men are supposed to win the war against the terrible force of Nazism makes a mockery of the war effort as a whole. The pseudo-soldiers on both sides of the war, preoccupied with their poor conditions and bodily suffering, have no real sense of what they're even fighting for.

Vonnegut's depiction of the ridiculous soldier also serves to undercut the illusion of masculinity and war. The idealized hero's most celebrated characteristics are those linked to his masculinity: courage, aggression, physical strength, and determination. Billy, apathetic and unfit for the war effort, possesses none of these qualities. In the moments when Billy is expected to act most like a soldier, or at the very least expected to feign the masculine ideals of bravery and fortitude, Vonnegut turns the meta-narrative about glorified masculinity on its head and further exaggerates Billy's absurdity. He writes, "The Americans marched fairly stylishly out of the British compound. Billy Pilgrim again led the parade. He had silver boots now, and a muff, and a piece of azure curtain which he wore like a toga."[2] Vonnegut's description of the men marching off to Dresden evokes the image of Billy as a silly entertainer; the picture of Billy and the other pathetic men parading themselves as soldiers completely rejects the image of the wartime hero. Billy's inability to courageously bear the unpleasant conditions at the war camp leads him to search for comfort and warmth, he finds in the flashy, feminine garb. Adorned in such ridiculous, effeminate apparel, Billy exchanges his outward masculinity for the appearance of a woman. Rather than rouse his strength in a time of need, Billy recoils from asserting his masculinity; against all that war heroism stands for, he prefers an absurd costume—the part of Cinderella—to the role of a soldier.

WITH SUCH DISTURBING IMAGES OF THE ABSURD AND ROBOTIC SOLDIERS, VONNEGUT ASSERTS THAT THERE ARE NO TRUE GLORIFIED HEROES IN WAR—A CLAIM WHICH SERVES TO QUESTION OUR PARTICIPATION IN WAR IN GENERAL.

To counter Billy's pitiful, non-masculine image of the soldier, Vonnegut offers Roland Weary, a war-hungry teenager obsessed with gruesome torture and the idea of achieving glory. Constantly boasting about his bloodied war-knife and imagining himself as part of the Three Musketeers, Weary represents a hyper-masculinity associated with war. He despises Billy's indifference about fighting and his lack of commitment, interacting with him only as a means of asserting power over someone even more pitiful than himself. Yet Weary turns out to be just as absurd a soldier as Billy. His exaggerated masculinity and militaristic bravado only further emphasize his inadequacy and ridiculousness. In reality, Weary has no sense of the war he is fighting and appears as a deluded soldier. Vonnegut describes Weary "delivering dumb messages which nobody had sent and which nobody was pleased to receive," believing that his war knowledge has made him the leader of his group.[3] Vonnegut's use of parody in his descriptions of Weary highlights this overzealous soldier's actual lack of the masculine qualities traditionally expected of war heroes. A fat, unpopular, inhuman and crass individual, Weary rejects the brotherly ties which bind soldiers together in war when he acts on his bitter hatred for Billy; in the final moments of his life, Weary blames Billy for his death and sets into motion a plan for revenge which ultimately leads to Billy's own murder. Weary's delusional, overly militant character stands just as far from the idealized hero's masculinity as Billy does, offering further proof that Vonnegut finds no true heroes in war.

Vonnegut includes descriptions of the English officers residing in the Russian prisoner camp as a direct contrast to the pitiful images of Billy and Weary. These men, seemingly the ideal symbols of war, are depicted as clean-shaven, crisp-uniformed soldiers who bravely fight to defend their country. Vonnegut writes, "The Englishmen were clean and enthusiastic and decent and strong. They sang boomingly well. They had been singing together every night for years…the Englishmen had also been lifting weights and chinning themselves for years. Their bellies were like washboards. The muscles of their calves and upper arms were like cannonballs."[4] The Englishmen represent the spirit of the romanticized soldier, vocally proud to be fighting and committed to enhancing their physical strength for the fight. Even the enemy adores them; their idyllic masculinity and gallantry make war appear stylish and fun. Yet Vonnegut insists that the Englishmen do not represent a true image of heroism in the war either. Their years without fighting lets them look at war as an amusement, a game to be mastered like the "checkers and chess and cribbage and dominos and anagrams and charades" they play so well.[5] Additionally, the Englishmen are more focused on their appearance than on preparing to fight. Their advice to Billy and his comrades before they are employed to Dresden is that the primary concern of a soldier should be maintaining his appearance. Vonnegut's use of irony in this section emphasizes the error of equating the Englishmen with true war heroes; a well-kept appearance has no true value for a soldier in war, for it is ultimately not enough to save the men in Dresden.

In addition to his image of the pathetic anti-hero, Vonnegut offers an opposing, yet equally unsettling vision of the robotic soldier in war. During his wartime hospital stay, Billy delights in the stories of a science fiction writer, Kilgore Trout, who imagines robots that look like human beings. Vonnegut writes, "What made the story remarkable, since it was written in 1932, was that it predicted the widespread use of burning jellied gasoline on human beings. It was dropped on them from airplanes. Robots did the dropping. They had no conscience, and no circuits which would allow them to imagine what was happening to the people on the ground."[6] The robot in Trout's story is considered a hero in spite of the fact that he drops jellied gasoline on the humans with whom he interacts. For Vonnegut, the soldiers of World War II are similar creatures; characterized by emotional detachment from the killing they perform, these men fight without any regard for the inhumanity of war and return home only to be celebrated for their actions. Opposed to Billy and his ludicrous, unthreatening comrades, these soldiers fight so robotically that they forget they are killing men much like themselves. There is no bravery in fighting this way; a true hero could not kill like a machine without any reflection on the death and destruction caused by his own hands. Vonnegut's criticism of these soldiers is clear: in a war where men drop bombs like robots, who remains true to the honorable reasons behind fighting in the first place?

As a final challenge to the conventions of war heroism, Vonnegut offers a singular heroic moment in the novel when Edgar Derby, a volunteer soldier seemingly too old to fight, stands up to the traitorous Nazi-American Howard W. Campbell, Jr. and defends true American ideals. Repeatedly dubbing him "poor old Edgar Derby," Vonnegut makes an important statement by instilling heroism into a character who is middle-age, not overly masculine, and lacking the charm of traditional celebrated heroes. Vonnegut writes, "There are almost no characters in this story, and almost no dramatic confrontations, because most of the people in it are so sick, and so much the listless playthings of enormous forces. One of the main effects of war, after all, is that people are discouraged from being characters. But old Derby was a character now."[7] Here Vonnegut describes how the systematically powerful and debilitating nature of war strips men of their humanity, leaving them pathetic, ridiculous soldiers—or worse, unfeeling and robotic killers. Billy, Weary, the English officers and all the other soldiers portrayed in Vonnegut's novel lack any true character because they are marked by inaction. Derby is not the idealized hero traditionally seen in novels portraying war, but he is a hero because his unshakable patriotism compels him to act. Derby stands out as the noblest character of them all; his determination to ardently defend his country is coupled with an equally strong desire to preserve a sense of humanity and dignity in war.

For Vonnegut, then, the actual image of the war hero is very different from that idealized in our national ideology about heroism. Significantly, however, Vonnegut does not suggest that his own vision of heroism offers us any better consolation about war. He portrays Derby as a tragic hero, ultimately dying for a pointless crime unrelated to the ideals he so passionately upholds. If wars are mainly fought by characterless men with no sense of what they're fighting for, and the rare heroes end up tragically dying, how, then, can we justify fighting at all? In her book *The Politics of Postmodernism*, Linda Hutcheon explains how parody, like that which characterizes the writing of *Slaughterhouse Five*, reflects on questions like these by critiquing our national ideologies. She writes, "The postmodern's initial concern is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life; to point out that those entities that we unthinkingly experience as 'natural'…are in fact 'cultural'; made by us, not given to us."[8] Writing as a postmodernist author, Vonnegut does precisely this, pressing his readers to reconsider what they have been culturally taught to believe about war heroism and to truly think about the ideals behind the fighting. Although he offers no clear alternative, his criticism incites us to think about how to construct our own vision of war heroism and consider what implications the phenomenon of war has for humanity at large.

Caught in a Reverie by Kenny Barry

MORRISON'S CRITIQUE OF BLACK NATIONALISM

Whereas *Slaughterhouse Five* revises the fantasy of the hero celebrated in an actual historical war, Toni Morrison's *Paradise* looks at the phenomenon of war as it exists within a community. In her novel, Morrison writes about the historical wounding of African Americans following Emancipation in the latter half of the nineteenth century. Her novel speaks about the failure of Reconstruction, when, after ten years, African Americans in positions of power were expelled from their communities and forced to travel west. Resentful of the way whites treated them and their ancestors, the disallowed develop an intense loyalty to their race. Morrison writes, "They saved the clarity of their hatred for the men who had insulted them in ways too confounding for language: first by excluding them, then by offering them staples to exist in that very exclusion."[9] As past wounding bleeds into their present lives, these African Americans seek to establish a space where they can recover their pride and secure themselves against those outsiders who would threaten their attempt to rebuild. At the heart of their enforced exclusion is a fierce need to honor the trauma which has defined their community identity. Morrison presents this attitude as a kind of militaristic black nationalism, bent on maintaining racial purity through policing paradise and keeping out anything which threatens its utopian harmony. In describing her characters' search for a utopian space, Morrison addresses meta-narratives about national fantasies: because the fantasy is always failing, it must be constantly invoked and reiterated in order to exist. With Ruby, Morrison sets out to challenge the idealized image of paradise; her novel nods to the fantasy meta-narrative but shatters it through presenting the town as an unsustainable illusion of utopia. Though Morrison understands the vital role historical wounding plays in fueling the illusion, she ultimately critiques a kind of black nationalism which desperately seeks to maintain the fantasy of paradise.

By rooting her story in the historical plight of African Americans, Morrison stresses what is at stake in the establishment of Ruby. Following their ancestors' violent persecution, the town represents a paradise for the nine founding families who seek to reclaim safety and prosperity. Morrison offers a sense of how the men in the novel idealize Ruby by describing a group of Negro ladies who pose for a photograph in summer dresses. She writes, "Deek's image of the nineteen summertime ladies was unlike the photographer's. His remembrance was pastel colored and eternal."[10] These idyllic women, pure and youthful, represent the hope that the founding families had for Ruby in 1949. They wished to carry with them the ideals the Old Fathers' built Haven upon: a strong sense of community and commitment to caring for one another. To ensure their freedom, Ruby is protected in its complete isolation from the surrounding communities. Morrison writes, "Unique and isolated, his was a town justifiably pleased with itself. It neither had nor needed a jail…the one or two people who acted up, humiliated their families or threatened the town's view of itself were taken good care of. Certainly there wasn't a slack or sloven woman anywhere in town…from the beginning its people were free and protected."[11] The townspeople pride themselves on their lack of outside technology and sole reliance on traditional values to govern the community. They find no need to allow new, outside ideas to change the town which has remained a haven for its members since its founding families uprooted their lives and originally settled Ruby.

Though Morrison takes great pains to describe the historical trauma central to the novel, she ultimately condemns the strategy those living in Ruby use to maintain their paradise. Instead of being a community based on human connection and a sharing of resources, Morrison reveals that Ruby is only an illusion of utopia. The town's protective isolation is actually rooted in a fear of change and difference. Maintaining utopia involves a rejection of the other, of what lies "Out There," beyond Ruby's limits. Yet those living in Ruby are blind to the damage that isolation and exclusion cause in their community; strict societal restrictions are enforced to keep paradise cleansed, and the men of Ruby use increasing violence against anyone who threatens its purity. Morrison offers the example of Billie Delia to show what happens to those who push against the idealized image of paradise. In her youth, she makes a spectacle of herself by undressing in the street and from that moment becomes a source of shame for both her family and the greater community of Ruby. Morrison writes, "Pat knew that had her daughter been an 8-rock, they would not have held it against her. They would have seen it for what it was—only an innocent child would have done that, surely."[12] Though Billy Delia, being only a child, could not know the impropriety of her actions, she becomes marked by the community's belief in her deviant sexuality. As she grows older and expresses her sexuality more openly, Billie Delia is considered a liability for Ruby; in order to maintain their paradise, the community members must fiercely regulate desire, and as a result, she is rejected by them.

Morrison shows how, in spite of their attempts to regulate desire and to eliminate threats like Billie Delia, problems arise which undermine Ruby's utopian existence. Rumors of outrages like the birth of damaged infants, disappearing brides, and murderous conflicts between families are whispered throughout the town. Morrison's novel demonstrates how the disallowed desire of the community is pushed onto the women. She writes, "The proof they had been collecting since the terrible discovery in the spring could not be denied: the one thing that connected all these catastrophes was in the Convent. And in the Convent were those women."[13] The men of Ruby are finally forced to confront these problems, but rather than accept responsibility, they blame and attack the women living in the Convent just outside their borders. Having displayed unacceptable desire, these women are marginalized by Ruby's rigid policing and represent a threat to utopia that must be eliminated at any cost. Because Morrison's novel begins and ends with this violent encounter, she places the image of weapons and killing at the very forefront of her story. She writes, "They are nine, over twice the number of the women they are obliged to stampede or kill and they have the paraphernalia for either requirement: rope, a palm leaf cross, handcuffs, Mace and sunglasses, along with clean, handsome guns."[14] The calculated preparedness of the men implies the promise of battle; each man carrying his weapon enters the Convent with the intention of destroying the enemy that threatens his paradise. The black nationalist attitude that fuels the desire for purity in Ruby is so strong that the men resort to war-like behavior. Here Morrison shows how, in an attempt to police inside paradise, the townspeople reenact the violence they fought so hard to escape. They subvert the ideals upon which Ruby's utopian existence is founded, and in doing so confirm the emptiness of their fantasy.

INSTEAD OF PROMOTING SOCIETAL CHANGE AND THE CREATION OF A TRUE KIND OF PARADISE ACHIEVED BY RELEASING TRAUMA, RUBY PUNISHES THOSE WHO ENVISION A COMMUNITY BASED ON ABSOLUTE TOLERANCE AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION.

Morrison also shatters the illusion of Ruby as a paradise with the dispute over the Oven, a central meeting place that serves as a monument to the significance of the town's history. Instead of symbolizing their ancestors' sacrifices and shared community, however, the Oven incites conflicting interpretations of their past, which threaten Ruby's utopian harmony. Everyone has their own version of the Disallowing, and as a result, two groups emerge with conflicting beliefs about what the Oven should communicate about the town.

The older generation argues that the Oven's message upholds religion by demanding that Ruby's members "beware" God's power, whereas the younger generation interprets the message as a need for change which can only be achieved by "being the furrow of his brow."[15] The novel offers a description of the different community members' personal interpretations of Ruby's history, all of which share a sense of the great disconnection that has happened in the town. Morrison writes, "'Furrow of His Brow' alone was enough for any age or generation.Specifying it, particularizing it, nailing its meaning down, was futile."[16] Nothing is to be gained from clarifying the Oven's message because those living in Ruby have abandoned the ideals by which the town was originally founded. She suggests that the loss of community cannot be effectively dealt with because the people of Ruby are so set on upholding the fantasy of utopia. The pride and close-mindedness of the 8-rock families contributes to the rigidity with which Ruby is governed and inhibits change from occurring in the town. Morrison shows that it is through the strict regulation of race and desire, along with the growing need for wealth, that the meaning of Ruby's community spaces has been corrupted. For Morrison, the inability to come together to reinvent their paradise and grow through human connection signifies that Ruby is actually a failed paradise.

Morrison's portrayal of Ruby as a dystopia serves to criticize the black nationalism that underlies the idealization of the town. Patricia, a light-skinned woman who resides in Ruby as an outsider, represents a threat to the purity demanded by this belief system. Despite being an ally to those in Ruby, she is hated by the 8-rock men because her father violated the blood-rule and married a white woman. Through an investigation of the stories of the families in Ruby, Pat discovers that certain names are crossed out from the town's history; their erasure signifies the power that the 8-rock hold to expel anyone who steps out beyond the utopian vision of Ruby. In the same chapter, Pat attends a Christmas pageant that publically displays this ritual erasure as it acts out the founding of the town and represents only seven families from the original nine. Morrison writes, "Did they really think they could keep this up? The numbers, the bloodlines, the who fucks who? All those generation of 8-rocks kept going, just to end up narrow as bale wire? Well to stay alive maybe they could…"[17] Erased from the town's history are those families who breached Ruby's desire for racial purity and suppression of desire. Pat's genealogy, then, serves as a counter-narrative of Ruby's history; in expressing the true community relations it offers proof of Ruby as a failed paradise and shows the great lengths to which the 8-rock go to maintain their fantasy. Morrison writes, "How exquisitely human was the wish for permanent happiness, and how thin human imagination became trying to achieve it."[18] Cataloguing the histories of the families seems to only exacerbate Pat's feelings of alienation, and she ultimately burns her papers, unable to bear the terrible truth of the town's history. After their destruction, however, Pat regrets her complicity in the town's erasure; the loss of the papers only sustains 8-rock power and the myth of paradise. Through Pat's story, Morrison reaffirms fantasy as a dangerous practice and condemns the black nationalist attitude that raises racial purity above community ethic.

TO DISRUPT THE META-NARRATIVE ABOUT WAR THAT IDEALIZES LOYALTY TO A PARTICULAR DELINEATED REGION, LE GUIN OFFERS A REPRESENTATION OF PATRIOTISM IN KARHIDE THAT REFLECTS UPON WHAT IT MEANS TO CORRUPT THE NOTION OF LOVE FOR ONE'S COUNTRY.

In the writing of *Paradise*, Morrison originally titled her work *War*, a tribute to the failure of paradise witnessed in Ruby. Her postmodern novel nods to the overarching fantasy meta-narrative and ultimately shatters it in an attempt to ask what other dreams we can successfully achieve without living a lie or inflicting violence upon those who threaten our illusions. Through challenging the romanticized vision of paradise, Morrison critiques the kind of black nationalism which misguidedly justifies war as a means of maintaining our idealized fantasies. War is seen by the 8-rock families as a necessary evil to keep paradise pure, yet from the reader's perspective, Ruby could not be less of a utopian space. The inability to recognize the townspeople's desire, their longing for deeper human connection, keeps Ruby trapped by its historical trauma. Instead of promoting societal change and the creation of a true kind of paradise achieved by releasing trauma, Ruby punishes those who envision a community based on absolute tolerance and freedom of expression. With the final massacre at the Convent, the fate of the women—Morrison's victims of war—remains unclear, blurred in mystical imagery and ghostly reconnections. Though she asserts that paradise requires constant work and revision, Morrison, like Vonnegut, obscures her own vision of an alternative to Ruby. Through shattering the idealized notion of the town, she encourages her readers to instead determine what paradise truly means to them. Despite the novel's uncertain ending, Morrison's inclusion of the deaths of the women inspires multivocality; as each townsperson narrates the events of the massacre according to her own interpretation, the master narrative that has consistently defined Ruby solely by its past wounding shatters.

LE GUIN'S CRITIQUE OF PATRIOTISM

As in the aforementioned novels, Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Left Hand of Darkness* also engages with the question of what motivates our participation in war. Whereas Morrison's novel defines fear of the other by focusing on racial purity and the rejection of unaccepted displays of desire, Le Guin's sense of difference in the novel stems instead from fear of the unfamiliar and hatred of what lies outside national borders. Reflecting upon the Cold War, she bases her novel on an alien world, Gethen, in an attempt to reexamine a period remembered for its extreme national loyalty. Faced with the mid-twentieth century Communist threat, Americans are recognized for having exhibited true patriotism, unwavering in their love for their country's ideals and their resolve that no outside "other" could challenge those principles on which their country was built. Through her representation of patriotism in Karhide, Le Guin challenges our lingering national fantasy of the patriotic citizen unquestioningly dedicated to his country, and she presents this image instead as a kind of national propaganda that justifies fighting.

To disrupt the meta-narrative about war that idealizes loyalty to a particular delineated region, Le Guin offers a representation of patriotism in Karhide that reflects upon what it means to corrupt the notion of love for one's country. Genly Ai, an envoy sent from Earth to make contact with the alien planet in the hope of fostering healthy exchange between the two worlds, is immediately struck by the significant role national allegiance plays in Karhide. In discussing the national politics, the Prime Minister, Estraven, tells Ai, "No, I don't mean love, when I say patriotism. I mean fear. The fear of the other. And its expressions are political, not poetical: hate, rivalry, aggression."[19] In Karhide, fear is king; it stems from the monarch down into the population, ruling the nation by pitting its residents against the fearsome other that threatens Karhide's supremacy. Patriotism as fear actually limits Karhide's advancement and superiority over other nations—the one thing King Argaven ardently desires for his nation—because it prevents Ai from convincing those in Karhide of his truth.

Le Guin parodies the sense of paranoia in Karhide in an attempt to show how the national ideology about patriotism ignores the very powerful and real role fear plays in motivating men to act in their own interest. Though Argaven resists Ai's desire for interplanetary exchange for fear of losing his own power and Karhide's dominant status, he is blind to the corruption and usurpation that is happening within his own government. Le Guin writes, "It seemed to me as I listened to Tibe's dull fierce speeches that what he sought to do by fear and by persuasion was to force his people to change a choice that had made before their history began…"[20] A member of the King's council easily manipulates Karhide's concept of patriotism, using the idealized belief in loyalty to Karhide alone—of fear of the neighboring nations and Ai's other worlds—as propaganda to further his own agenda. Rather than represent pure love for one's country and its people as a reflection of a greater love of humankind, Karhide's patriotism is self-love, committed to the betterment of only a particular portion of humanity that resides within invisible boundaries.

Central to Le Guin's representation of patriotism in Karhide is her concept of "shifgrethor," which can be defined as a deeply rooted pride that governs the interactions between the Gethenians. Shifgrethor is first mentioned in the novel as "prestige, face, place, the pride-relationship, the untranslatable and all-important principle of social authority" and Le Guin conveys how it complicates the relations between the citizens.[21] Rather than express how he truly feels, each Gethenian must maintain his own shifgrethor and respect others by not directly communicating his beliefs. A nation based on pride relations and adherence to social code distances its civilians from one another and more deeply etches the line that separates those in Karhide from the outside other. For example, Karhide's relationship to Orgoreyn, its neighboring nation, is built on underlying rivalry and antagonism. Though shifgrethor keeps the nations from responding to their conflict by mobilizing, Le Guin suggests that an attitude of patriotism has the dangerous capacity to trigger all-out war. She writes, "The prestige-competition, heretofore mostly economic, might force Karhide to emulate its larger neighbor, to become a nation…to become, as Estraven had also said, patriotic. If this occurred the Gethenians might have an excellent chance of achieving the condition of war."[22] Through the use of sarcasm, Le Guin aims to expose patriotism for what it really means to those nations who unquestioningly ascribe to its ideal. Rather than inspire the citizens of Karhide to act in the interest of their greater planet, fear-based patriotism leads to national identity formation based on a segregating "us-versus-them" mentality.

Through her critique of idealized patriotism, Le Guin suggests that true loyalty to one's country requires forging relationships and understanding with the rejected "other." Overcoming fear of difference, however, is no easy task in the novel, as even Estraven and Ai, those characters most dedicated to revising the concept of patriotism, struggle to bridge their divide. As suggested in Morrison's novel, perceived sexual deviance is cause for rejection and even violence towards a different "other." Le Guin explores this behavior with Estraven and Ai's inability to accept each other's strange sexuality, a distrust of the other which for much of the novel hinders their chances for survival. To Ai, Estraven's ambiguous gender and cyclic sexuality makes him impossible to categorize and therefore an untrustworthy ally. Similarly, Ai's unchanging gender, his constant state of kemmer, marks him as a kind of sexual pervert and strains his relationship with Estraven. By demonstrating how the intolerance underlying national loyalty in the novel exists even on a personal level, Le Guin questions how we can possibly uphold our own society's ideal-

ized vision of patriotism. She writes, "It was from the difference between us, not from the affinities and likenesses, but from the difference, that the love came: and it was itself the bridge, the only bridge, across what divided us." It is only once Estraven and Ai recognize the opportunity for growth and change in accepting each other's differences that a state akin to true patriotism is achieved.

By means of Estraven's voice in the novel, Le Guin upholds an alternative idea of loyalty, which demands that love for a country extend across national lines. Estraven's view of patriotism goes beyond concern for one's own self and one's own nation; he cares for the betterment and progression of Gethen as a whole, assuming a planetary vision for mankind. Describing all that he knows and loves about his home country, Estraven says, "But what is the sense of giving a boundary to all that, of giving it a name and ceasing to love where the name ceases to apply? What is love of one's country; is it hate of one's *uncountry*? Then it is not a good thing."[24] Patriotism for Estraven means looking past fear of the other, risking vulnerability for the sake of bettering all of humankind through open trade of knowledge and technology. For having these beliefs and supporting Ai's cause, Estraven is denounced as a traitor. It is only when Estraven sacrifices himself at the end of the novel, the ultimate proof of his loyalty to all humanity, that the truth of his vision for Gethen is acknowledged.

The Left Hand of Darkness differs from *Slaughterhouse Five* and *Paradise* in that it does work beyond just problematizing idealized war ideologies like "heroism," "black nationalism," and "patriotism." Le Guin's novel is most successful in that it offers a clear alternative in Estraven's patriotism which values personal connection, recognizing the potential for delight in accepting the unfamiliar other. Though the story's end promises progression for Gethen as the king sees past his own fear-based patriotism, it has come at the cost of a truly loyal man's life. Le Guin recognizes the potential for man to embrace Estraven's patriotism, but her novel also cautions the tragedy that can come from mistaking fear of the other as true love for humankind. Through offering an alternative patriotism devoted toward an all-embracing form of progress, Le Guin shatters the national meta-narrative which idealizes loyalty to one's country. Patriotism, then, only holds true meaning when it is rooted in personal connection and human understanding—a lesson Le Guin compels us to heed on our planet.

Slaughterhouse Five, *Paradise* and *The Left Hand of Darkness* demonstrate the potential for postmodern literature to encourage readers to reconsider the meta-narratives which propagate romanticized national ideologies about war. Though Vonnegut and Morrison's novels raise criticism and argue a need for reevaluation of our accepted cultural justifications for war, they provide no clear sense of what is truly worth fighting for. In a similar way, while Le Guin suggests that the acceptance of difference and the formation of relationships are necessary to incite change, she also does not let her readers forget how difficult achieving these ideals can be. Yet it may be enough for postmodern art to just offer us a critique of our society; the stories of Vonnegut, Morrison and Le Guin go beyond celebrating or demonizing our world in an attempt to foster real conversation about our national ideologies. One of postmodernism's primary goals is to compel us to imagine for ourselves alternative ways of being in the world. By not offering us easy solutions, these postmodern authors encourage us to commit to human connection—the only means by which we can recognize each other's needs and bring about universal change. War, in the context of the aforementioned novels, is what we have turned to in our inability to understand each other's differences. In addition to exposing the ways in which we rationalize war, the postmodern shattering of master narratives allows for the multiple voices and conflicting perspectives, which communicate those stories and lessons and are not heard often enough. Like Estraven and Ai, we must reach out and touch each other across difference in order to truly rebuild our world.

Dormant by Margaret Griffiths